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1986 Airdrop by Secret Network

'Kicker' Details How Ban on Contra Aid Was Skirted

By DOYLE McMANUS, *Times Staff Writer*

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C.—The hours before the mission had been tense, with arguments in smoke-filled rooms in San Salvador and anxious telephone calls to the controllers in Washington. And as the Southern Air Transport cargo plane made its secret night crossing into the forbidden black airspace of Nicaragua, in the cockpit tension rose again.

But ahead in the jungle blazed a line of primitive beacons—three hilltops on fire—and behind them, brilliantly lit, the Nicaraguan rebels' "drop zone." As the *contras* waited below, 17 parachutes carrying guns and ammunition came floating down. "It was a perfect drop," crewman Iain Crawford recalled.

That April 11, 1986, mission, one of the largest arms airdrops ever made to the contras, was the culmination of weeks of planning by White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North and retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord. Crawford, who rode in the plane as the "kicker," the crewman in charge of the cargo, says he later briefed North and Secord about the operation.

At the time, North and his associates hailed the flight of the Southern Air L-100 as a success. With a few more such drops, one CIA officer wrote, the contras could achieve a long-sought goal: "to form [a] solid southern force" to attack Nicaragua's leftist regime from its exposed flank.

Now, in congressional chambers and grand jury hearing rooms, the story of the April 11 airdrop is being told again.

It illuminates, in more detail than before, how North and Secord delivered guns to the contras despite the law that banned the Reagan Administration from giving the rebels military aid. Using a structure of ostensibly private companies, they built a clandestine network that drew on intelligence gathered by the CIA, weapons reportedly bought with money from Saudi Arabia and airplanes obtained through Southern Air, a Miami-based charter firm that was once owned by the CIA.

Many Involved

Along the way, the ostensibly private network entangled the CIA's station chief in Costa Rica, the U.S. Army's chief adviser in El Salvador, the State Department and the Salvadoran air force. In the end, however, the operation rested on the efforts of a few dozen adventurers—like Crawford, a 31-year-old Army veteran who volunteered to work for the contras' secret airlift because, he acknowledged, "I love covert operations."

Today, Crawford is one of the key witnesses in the congressional investigation of the network. Several other sources have confirmed the key elements of his account; but Crawford, now the owner of a Fayetteville parachute-rigging firm, has been the only one to come forward and tell his story in public.

"It was an unusual mission," he said in an interview in his office here last week. "Most of the time we flew Caribou [small, twin-engine cargo planes] from Honduras just over the river"—into northern Nicaragua, where the largest contra army roams.

Larger Plane

This time, however, the plane was a Lockheed L-100, a four-engine cargo plane often known by its military designation as a C-130. The L-100 can carry three times the cargo of a Caribou over a far longer range.

And this time, the destination was southern Nicaragua, where a small contra army led by Fernando Chamorro, a veteran guerrilla known as "El Negro" (the Black One), was struggling to open a second front against the Sandinista regime.

On March 24, 1986, said the report of the Tower Commission, which investigated the Reagan Administration's secret arms sales to Iran, Secord sent North a message outlining plans for the airdrop. The message referred to an "L-100 drop to Blackie's troops" that would include ammunition for Soviet-type AK-47 rifles, grenades and medical supplies.

On April 9, Crawford said, a Southern Air L-100 landed at the contras' main air base, a dusty packed-earth strip at Aguacate in eastern Honduras. On board, he said, was a crew hired by retired Air Force Lt. Col. Richard B. Gadd, the man who organized the airlift operation for Secord, plus Southern Air's chief L-100 pilot, a man who used the code name "Joseph."

Gadd, who was voted limited immunity from prosecution last month by the congressional committees investigating the secret aid effort, has refused to speak to reporters. But a Washington attorney for Southern Air, Robert M. Beckman, confirmed that the plane belonged to the firm and was under contract to Gadd when the mission occurred. Gadd had originally chartered the plane on behalf of the State Department to fly a load of U.S.-provided "humanitarian aid"—mostly non-lethal military equipment—from the United States to Honduras, he said.

"The pilot was Bonzo van Hagen," Crawford said of the April 9 trip. "Bonzo said we needed to get ready for an 'inside' mission. We loaded 17 loads of weapons and ammunition on the L-100. There was no humanitarian aid on that plane whatsoever."

The plane then flew to Ilopango, El Salvador's main air base, he said. That night, the Tower Commission reported, North received another message at his National Security Council office. "Confirmed arrival [city, country deleted] of L-100 w/load of [ammunition]," North noted. "Confirming drop, Friday 11 April."

Doubt on Mission

At Ilopango, however, the mission was not so certain, Crawford recalled. Van Hagen and his crew were met at the Salvadoran air base by a Cuban-American who said his name was "Max Gomez." In fact, he was Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA officer who had gone to El Salvador under the sponsorship of Vice President George Bush.

"Gomez told Bonzo that the plane wasn't going 'inside,' that he didn't know if that was authorized," Crawford said.

"So Bonzo talked with Gadd on the phone," he said. "Later, Bonzo talked with William Langton [the president of Southern Air]. The word was that we were 'allowed to go party'—meaning we were authorized to fly over Nicaragua."

(Langton, through Southern Air's lawyer, acknowledges that he approved the use of the plane for an airdrop but denies that he authorized the crew to enter Nicaraguan airspace. "Langton was not told that the drop zone was inside Nicaragua," attorney Beckman said. "Langton would not have authorized the use of an $8-million aircraft in a war zone where none of his insurance would apply." Beckman said he did not know whether Langton knew what the plane's cargo was. But his acknowledgement that Langton approved an airdrop went well beyond Southern Air's position last year, when company spokesmen claimed no knowledge at all of the secret contra supply operation.)

Flight Planning Session

The next day, April 10, six men assembled at Max Gomez's safehouse, Crawford said. "Bonzo and I walked into a smoky room," he said. "There were Max; Ramon and Rafael [two Cuban-Americans who worked with Gomez]; and Steele" —U.S. Army Col. James Steele, chief of the U.S. Military Advisory Group in El Salvador.

"It was a flight planning session," he said. "Max and Bonzo did the planning. Col. Steele helped with information. He told us where the Sandinista radar was, when to turn our lights off and what kind of radio contact we could have."

The crew then drove to the air base, where Steele inspected the plane, Crawford said. "He came in back with me and wanted to know what the cargo was," he said. "It was written on the boxes—'AK-47' [rifles]. He questioned me about the footlockers, and I told him they held G-3 rifles. He questioned me if they were padded properly, said he didn't want any of the barrels to get bent.

"There's no doubt that Steele did know what was on that aircraft," he said. "He did seem a little bit nervous. . . . Just before we took off he gave us two M-16 rifles and several grenades as personal survival equipment, in case the plane went down. I wasn't sure what we were supposed to do with the grenades."

(Under the laws in force last April, U.S. officials were authorized to provide intelligence information to the contras as long as they did not actually help plan any specific operations. Officials like Steele were also authorized to observe the secret airlift operation so the Administration would know what was going on—although some officials, like Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, said the U.S. government was not monitoring the operation.

(Steele, who now commands an Army unit in West Germany, has refused to talk with reporters about his role in the contra airlift. But a congressional source said that the colonel testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee last year and that his account agreed with Crawford's.)

As the cargo plane took off, Crawford said, he felt no sense of danger. "We finally had a good airplane with decent navigation equipment," he said. "It was a lot better than the planes we were flying out of Aguacate." The cargo-rigging equipment wasn't to Crawford's liking—"We bought some of it at a supermarket; it was more or less jury-rigged"—but that was less important than the plane.

The L-100 flew south from El Salvador, skirted Nicaragua's Pacific coast, and turned east across Costa Rica. Then it turned north again to fly across Nicaragua's lightly guarded southeastern border, searching for the drop zone. "There was nothing there," Crawford said. "We couldn't find anything. We circled for about half an hour. We were getting close to a big lake and we were getting nervous about being spotted. . . . Finally, Bonzo decided to close up and go home."

The next night, April 11, the crew prepared to try again. But "Joseph," the Southern Air pilot who rode on the first flight as an observer, tried to back out of the second flight, Crawford said. "Joseph was nervous," he said. "He said he had seen what he needed to see. . . . But [the co-pilot] said Langton wanted him on board so he could go back to Miami and tell them how it went and whether Southern Air wanted to continue in this business."

Order Denied

(Southern Air attorney Beckman denied that Langton gave any such order.)

This time, Crawford said, the mission went like clockwork. The L-100 flew into Nicaragua at a different point on the same border, in case Sandinista anti-aircraft gunners were lying in wait. The crew quickly spotted the burning hilltops pointing the way to the drop zone and made radio contact with the contras on the ground.

"All 17 loads went out on a single pass," Crawford said. "The contras said they were standing by for more. We didn't even answer that one. We were getting out of there."

The next day, the Tower Commission reported: "Lt. Col. North received a secure message from the CIA field officer [in Costa Rica] confirming a successful drop."

A week later, on April 20, Gadd turned up in San Salvador and asked Crawford to join him on an executive jet "to brief the principals," Crawford said.

'Got Away With It'

At the time, he said, Crawford did not know who the three men on the jet were. All three listened intently to Crawford's account of the flight; the youngest, who was dressed in a khaki bush jacket, said: "Thank God we got away with it."

Since then, from newspaper photographs and television film, Crawford has recognized two of the three men he briefed. One, the young man in khaki, was North. Another was Secord. The third man, he said, was older, balding, and wore glasses. Was it John M. Poindexter, then President Reagan's national security adviser? "It might have been, but I'm just not sure," Crawford said.

Crawford spent only one more month as a crewman in the secret network. Over time, he said, he complained increasingly about equipment that he considered substandard. He began to wonder, he said, about the way the costs of the airlift were being billed; some of his superiors, he said, seemed more interested in profits than in aiding the contra cause.

At the end of May, Crawford returned to Fayetteville for a visit home, and Secord aide Robert Dutton told him he was no longer needed at Ilopango or Aguacate.

"It was probably just as well," Crawford said. "I've done enough adventuring."

Crawford returned to his parachute-rigging business here, a workshop stacked with high-tech fabrics, reels of nylon rope and sewing machines.

But the story was not over. Last February, he said, he won a contract to manufacture lightweight gear for the Army. The same week, he appeared on NBC publicly describing his missions in Central America for the first time.

Two weeks later, the Army told him that his contract had been canceled—"for convenience of the government," he was told.

Senate investigators who interviewed Crawford about the contra airlift said they now plan to look into the Army's handling of his contract as well, to see whether it was canceled in retaliation for his decision to go public.

Meanwhile, Crawford said, he has consulted with a lawyer—and is looking forward to the congressional hearings, scheduled to begin next month, which will explore the contra airlift and its links to the Administration's secret arms sales to Iran.